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Duxbury Clipper

## ✓ Who Was Georgianna Wright?

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Georgianna Wright has been in the news a lot recently as Duxbury takes steps to make the Wright Building a useful town building once again. But who really was Georgianna Wright?

In many ways she was and still is an enigma. At times she seems to be a character from an Edith Wharton novel, and yet she was very much a real woman who lived most of her adult life in Duxbury and was the matriarch of the town's wealthiest families.

She was born Georgianna Buckham in New York City in 1837 and raised in a wealthy household. Her father George Buckham was a

prominent and successful lawyer, originally from Scotland. He retired early and then traveled with his family extensively in Europe. The

famous painter Henry Inman painted two-year-old Georgianna and her mother in 1837. (The painting is now in the collection of the MFA and can be viewed at [www.MFA.org](http://www.MFA.org).) Georgianna came of age in New York in a time when the city was explosively expanding to become a world-class city.

She married her first husband George Wright when she was 21. He was 13 years older than she was. George Wright came from a very wealthy Brookline family who made their money in dry goods and cotton. George and his brother started a company that purchased and shipped cotton from the south from their father's many mills. The combination of inherited wealth and a company that made a large amount of money during and after the Civil War made George Wright a very wealthy man.



One of the few known photos of Georgianna Wright, taken on her steam yacht, *Lucille*.

How wealthy were the Wrights? In short, they were in the Vanderbilt category of affluence. Their yacht *Lucille* alone was valued at \$4,000 (and later sold to the Vanderbilts) and their furniture and silverware were also worth \$24,000. This was in a time when the average Duxbury house was valued at only \$500. It was the Gilded Age, and the robber baron type of wealth flourished during the scandal-ridden years of President Ulysses Grant.

In 1868 Georgianna and George Wright left New York City and settled in Duxbury. She was 31 at the time and came with their children Anna who was 10, John 7, and George Jr., who was 1. Their daughter Florence was born in 1876, after their move to Duxbury. George's nephew William, who was 29, was also part of their household.

One wonders what Georgianna's first impression of Duxbury was after the dazzle of New York and Europe. At the time of her family's move, Duxbury had a population of less than 2,000 and was down on its luck after the stagnant years of ebbing shipbuilding. Yet she continued to live in Duxbury for another 50 years.

**Names  
& Places**



The Wright family was part of a juggernaut of change that occurred in Duxbury in the 1870s. The arrival of the French-Atlantic cable, the building of the railroad, the start of the Myles Standish Monument, the Myles Standish hotel and the subsequent building of summer cottages all along Duxbury's shore-front were all large changes that were personified by the Wright family and their extensive Pine Hill estate.

They had bought a Weston family house on St. George Street (now the site of Duxbury High School) and transformed it into a glittering showplace with a French (mansard) roof and sunken boxwood gardens and imported Italian marble fireplaces. It must have been largely Georgianna's taste that turned this down-at-the-heels shipping era house into a Victorian "Magnificent Ambersons" estate.

The Wright family considered Duxbury home, but like all fantastically wealthy families they had several other residences: one in New York City, one in Brookline and finally a townhouse on Dartmouth Street in Back Bay Boston.

Many Duxbury residents of that era never met Georgianna Wright; she lived in a different universe. What they knew was that she was a devoted mother to her four children. Her two oldest children married, but never had any children. Her two youngest died at an early age. Florence died of meningitis at age 24. George Junior, clearly the family's shining star, graduated from Harvard and began working in Boston. Sadly, soon after graduation in 1888, he fell five stories to his death down an elevator shaft.

It was in George's memory that a building on the Wright estate was given to the town for a library, and Harmony Street became officially known as St. George Street. In 1907 another more substantial building was begun in honor of all the deceased Wright family members. In 1909 this too was given to the town of Duxbury as a fully stocked free library and today is known as the Wright Building.

In 1897 when she was 60, Georgianna's husband George died of pneumonia. By 1900 she had married William Wright, her husband's nephew. "Willie" Wright was much beloved by many townspeople as he seemed to get out and mix with them more than the senior Wright ever did. He was a gregarious bon vivant who dabbled in state politics, town affairs, horse and cattle breeding and showing, real estate and cranberry production. He was also the Wright family member who made sure no Duxbury resident was in want during hard times. He died in 1912 at their Back Bay home.

Georgianna Wright's last years must have been lonely since she survived her two husbands and all of her four children. She seems to have spent increasingly more time at her Back Bay townhouse and died there in March 1919 at age 82. She remembered the Duxbury Library with a bequest of 300 books. The Pine Hill estate was left to Harvard University, her son's alma mater.

Eighty-four years after her death, Georgianna Wright's spirit seems as strong and incandescent as ever as Duxbury struggles to honor and uphold her generous gift of a handsome building to her adopted hometown.



**The Wright estate, called Pine Hill, now the site of Duxbury High School.**